

Film Close-Up: Natasha Richardson

by Joey_Berlin

Natasha Richardson did not need to refer to Susan Minot's novel "Evening" while filming the book's new big-screen adaptation in order to create her convincing performance. Playing a daughter comes naturally when the actress who portrays your mother is actually your mom.

NATASHA RICHARDSON - Natasha Richardson and Vanessa Redgrave star in Lajos Koltai's 'Evening.' CNS Photo courtesy of Gene Page. Richardson's real-life mother, Oscar-winner Vanessa Redgrave, plays a woman on her deathbed in "Evening," overcome by feverish recollections of a wild love and loss she experienced 40 years earlier. Richardson keeps a bedside vigil along with characters played by Toni Collette and Meryl Streep (the star-studded cast also includes Claire Danes, Glenn Close, Hugh Dancy and Streep's daughter, Mamie Gummer).

"Evening" marks the first time Richardson has appeared on-screen with her mother, and the experience was intense. Richardson, whose father was the late director Tony Richardson and grandfather was the renowned actor Sir Michael Redgrave, continued her family's tradition of performing Shakespeare at London's Old Vic before she appeared in films.

On the big screen, Richardson's credits include "The Handmaid's Tale," "Maid in Manhattan," "The White Countess" and "Nell," the 1994 drama in which she co-starred with Irish actor Liam Neeson. They were married that year, and have two sons.

Q: You filmed a scene in "Evening" with your mother, Vanessa Redgrave, in which you watch her character die. How difficult was that?

A: It was very upsetting. It was really about finding a way to hold it all together, instead of the opposite. It not only makes you project forward but it also brought up memories of my father dying. It hurt. But it's my job to go to painful places and to pull myself back. And it added to the scene. I didn't have to manufacture anything. It was all right there.

Q: What was it like to work with your mother?

A: It pushed so many buttons in terms of Vanessa and myself. We could bring all our past history, all our love and our past issues, our sufferings. And there was also the relationship I had in the film with Toni Collette's character. She played my sister and it was true, the "sister dynamic." Sisters adore each other, know each other better than anyone, and consequently they can be cruel and fight with each other more than anyone else on the planet.

Q: Did you find yourself pondering the film's big life-and-death issues off the set, at night?

A: Yes, I found myself in an emotionally vulnerable place. The director loves and respects actors, so it was all pouring out of me. So it was like that, but at the end of the day you'd still find a quite merry band of wastrels in the hotel bar, having a laugh. I think it was that thing of having to burst the bubble or else it would just get so intense. My mother and I did not need to know what was going through each other's minds.

Q: One story line in "Evening" is set among young wealthy people in Rhode Island in the 1950s and the other is contemporary. Did it feel like you were making two distinct films?

A: It did feel like two films. There was no crossover between the two casts. We did our movie and then there was their movie. It was a lovely surprise to see it finished. It flows beautifully.

Q: It took just three weeks to film your role. Is acting kind of a cushy job?

A: Not really! It's a nightmare profession! Having said that, it also gives you enormous privileges. It can take you to amazing places. So sometimes it is cushy, but filming can be tough and brutal. The acting stuff is a joy, it's all the other stuff that's hard. You face potential humiliation, bad reviews, getting turned down for parts. You're exposed in ways that you aren't in other professions. And you don't get paid more because of your experience.

Q: Do you and your husband, Liam Neeson, have a plan to work together?

A: I would love to do a play together. There's nothing in the pipeline at the moment. Besides, stage work is really grueling. It requires a lot to do a major classic like "Streetcar" or "Hamlet" eight times a week. I have to find a burning desire to play a part and I haven't found the next one yet. And a long run is difficult when you have school-age children. Your day off is Monday and that's when the kids are in school, and you still don't see them because you work in the evenings.

Q: You are a third-generation actor. So do you want your two children to be actors as well?

A: No, just the opposite. The desire to act has to be very deep-rooted, like a vocation. That's what keeps you going. And my children are boys and then they'd have to be compared to Liam. I went through that and it's horrible.

Q: Liam projects such a cool authority on-screen. What is he like at home?

A: He does have a great gravitas and stature in real life. He has great soulfulness and integrity. He's very disarming. And he has a great sense of humor.

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